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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [CVIS](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KJAN](#) [TN](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: TONGA: PLOTTING THE FUTURE AFTER THE PEOPLE
UNMISTAKABLY ENDORSE RAPID REFORM

REF: A. SUVA 158
[1](#)B. SUVA 146
[1](#)C. SUVA 109
[1](#)D. SUVA 71

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Most everyone in Tonga accepts an April 24 election signaled the vast majority want rapid democratic reform. Prime Minister Sevele was shocked by the result. He thought an onslaught of ads tying veteran People's Representatives (PRs) to a riot in November 2006 would sway voters. He was wrong. Two days after the election, Sevele met with PR leader Pohiva to start a dialogue on the future, a very useful sign, though many issues will need to be worked through. Both the PRs (instinctively in opposition mode) and the Government (inclined to look for checks on popular will) need to re-orient themselves to finding a transparent, inclusive means to build the future political system. The King reportedly remains focused on cashing out his business interests and preparing for his luxurious coronation on August 1. Meanwhile, criminal sedition cases against a number of PRs are on the court docket for August. China continues to ply the Tonga Government with assistance, including two new funding arrangements announced during the King's recent visit. Tonga, as current Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), sees a degree of uncertainty about the commitment of Fiji's interim government (IG) to elections by March 2009 and expects a ministerial delegation will need to visit Suva before the PIF leaders meeting in August. Tonga's Defense Board has approved two more six-month deployments of troops to Iraq (MNFI) to September 2009, with an option to reconsider if the U.S. pulls back. Tonga leaders remain intent on the USG reciprocating by offering NIV services on the ground in Nuku'alofa. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) In a visit to Nuku'alofa May 5-7, the Ambassador met with a wide variety of prominent Tongans. The King was ailing and unavailable, and PM Sevele was on a trip to Europe and Washington; but interlocutors included Chief Justice Ford, Acting PM Tangi, Foreign Minister/Defense Minister Tu'a, Finance Minister 'Afualo, Attorney General Taumoepeau, Tonga Defense Services (TDS) Commander Brigadier General Uta'atu, PR Akilisi Pohiva, PR Clive Edwards, Noble Fielakepa, the High Commissioners of Australia and New Zealand, and the Ambassador of China.

Elections clear: Tongans want rapid reform

[1](#)3. (C) Tonga's April 24 election for People's Representatives

(PRs) to Parliament (Ref A) changed the political landscape dramatically. Five veteran PRs, who have been pushing hard for democratic reforms and who are under indictment on allegations of inciting a November 2006 riot, were elected with sizable majorities, in some cases by larger totals than previously. Initial results suggested at least six PRs out of nine, reflecting a good 80% of Tonga's population, had won on reform platforms. PM Sevele's political advisor Lopeti Senituli (protect) told us pro-democracy leader Akilisi Pohiva's results were exceptionally impressive. Once again, he had the highest vote totals in the country by far, but he also won two populous districts on Tongatapu that he had never won before, including the home district of PM Sevele. Pohiva told us two more PRs have made clear since the election they are in the reformist camp. Only one out of nine, the junior PR from Vava'u, is staying away.

Some conservatives looking for brakes

¶4. (C) Most people in Tonga, even in the Government, agree that the people spoke clearly: they want democratic reform to proceed, and they want it quickly. But some conservative elements are grumbling. The Attorney General (protect) expressed a hope that "the people weren't endorsing lawlessness." Senituli said his own view is that voters were opting strongly for reform, not endorsing the riot. Some in Government, including Brigadier General Uta'atu, head of the Tonga Defense Service (TDS), are suggesting eventual reforms need to include provisions to screen out those who lack sufficient education and experience from running for seats and taking ministerial portfolios. Uta'atu referred to the

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"Taiwan model." Some at MFA raised the possibility of adding new checks and balances to curb populist enthusiasm in the future system.

PM's "voter education," media controls backfired

¶5. (C) Sources close to Sevele said he was absolutely shocked by the election result. He had been confident the public would vote out the old crowd of PRs, blaming them for the riot. For two and a half weeks prior to the election, the Government had flooded the populace with ads directly linking the PRs with the riot. Reportedly, the Government distributed 300 video cassettes across Tonga, and Government reps bought all available time slots on the one commercial radio station. By several accounts, the PM's office had directed a censorship effort to ban from government-owned TV Tonga and Radio Tonga all candidate messages that might be considered critical of the Government. Several sources, including Senituli (protect), suggested the effort backfired, stirred further irritation against the PM, and encouraged votes for incumbent PRs. New Finance Minister 'Afualo Matoto (protect) said Sevele "is the most hated person in Tonga." Others echoed that sentiment. Senituli acknowledged the Government needs to "work harder" on media issues. We proposed the best course is to unfetter the media and live with criticism when it occurs.

PM opens door to dialogue...and hope

¶6. (C) Pohiva informed us that two days after the election PM Sevele arranged a meeting between the two. Sevele and Pohiva were once colleagues in the pro-democracy movement; but, with Sevele's move into the PM-ship where he has been perceived to be slow on reform, and with Sevele blaming Pohiva for the riot that destroyed Sevele's supermarket and endangered his family, the two had not spoken in ages. Pohiva clearly was encouraged by the meeting, though he and Deputy PM Tangi, who also attended, both acknowledge the discussion did not reach conclusions. Sevele's outreach was, in itself, a positive signal.

¶7. (C) In the meeting, Pohiva offered a deal: if the King would publicly sign a document accepting the political

reforms negotiated and informally accepted by Parliament last year, the pro-democracy movement would attempt to ensure the King's coronation festivities on August 1 are not obstructed and would work with the Government collegially to iron out details for Tonga's new, more-democratic political process to be implemented in 2010. Sevele reportedly agreed to take the offer back to Government (and the King) for consideration. Tangi told us the Government's intent now is, in its last two years, to design the best possible future. Sevele has agreed to meet Pohiva again, once Sevele returns from his current trip to Europe and Washington. Pohiva has agreed to postpone a vacation in New Zealand in order to have that second meeting. Senituli is relatively optimistic that the two sides can now work together to a sensible outcome.

People's Reps still in opposition mode?

¶8. (C) In the conversation with Sevele, Pohiva attempted to re-open at least part of last year's deal: arguing that the formula for the new Parliament (17 PRs, 9 Nobles, and up to 4 selectees of the King) should be adjusted to permit the King only 2 selectees. Pohiva told us Sevele seemed open to considering that change; however, Senituli said the attempt to re-open concluded negotiations was not well-received by Government. Senituli did acknowledge that Pohiva seems to be taking on a more positive attitude than he had often exhibited in the past. (Note: Pohiva told us he is re-evaluating his view from February (Ref D) that this was his last election. He is re-invigorated...and maybe thinking it would be good to be PM.)

¶9. (C) Another PR reformist leader, Clive Edwards, is still very embittered by the Government's pre-election pressures on media and on pro-democracy candidates. Edwards described how security forces, both TDS and Police, armed with warrants from the PM's office issued under the state of emergency that has continued for the 18 months since the riots, broke up a church-organized gathering that was to feature Edwards and Pohiva. Edwards recounted the extensive censorship of the media and the propaganda tying PRs with riot sedition.

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Edwards has proposed publicly that, given the election results, the current Sevele Government should resign, to be replaced with a caretaker government charged to negotiate the future political structure and carry out new elections. Pohiva told us the PRs are meeting repeatedly to try to fashion a coherent vision for building the future.

Nobles considering their own interests

¶10. (C) Finance Minister 'Afualo said Tonga's 33 Nobles are nervously considering their own futures. They elect 9 of their members to Parliament; but traditionally they have, in most cases, just gone along with what the King and his self-appointed cabinet decided. Now some figure they had better take active roles in the negotiation process for the future. The two newly elected Nobles are seen as relatively progressive. Some others are seen as very hard-line against the PRs. Interestingly, Clive Edwards (protect) told us a group of Nobles in Parliament has approached him (a lawyer) to draft impeachment charges against Sevele, and he has tentatively agreed to do so.

Shoreline-sale and coronation preparations

¶11. (C) Several sources said the King has only two issues in focus at present: the sale of his Shoreline utility asset and his coronation August 1. New Finance Minister 'Afualo said negotiations continue on details of the Government's re-purchase of Shoreline. A gross price of T\$26M (US\$13M) is agreed; but the Government believes certain liabilities should be deducted from that. Shoreline is resisting. 'Afualo says he will cut off negotiations if necessary. On the coronation, we hear the King believes the Government's

numerous preparatory committees are inept. He has asked private businesses to take up the slack. Media report the public cost of the event is estimated at T\$6M (US\$3M). We heard the King is aware of concern about the budget and, in his own way, is trying to economize. He was appalled by the cost of ermine in London and has decided he can make due with the ermine trim from his father's royal cloak.

Riot-related court cases continue

¶12. (C) Chief Justice Ford reported that the hundreds of riot-related criminal cases are moving smoothly through the Tonga judicial system. In fact Tonga's case-management has been so impressive that Ford will visit New York in early June to receive a UN award. In July, Tonga's Court of Appeal will consider an appeal by five PRs, including Pohiva and Edwards, against a preliminary ruling by Ford in their cases.

The PR cases are currently scheduled for trial in August. All the PRs but Edwards have chosen a jury trial. Pohiva is stating publicly that the election results foreshadow what a jury will conclude: the PRs are not guilty of sedition. Edwards, having seen too many jury trials, is still unwilling to trust the popular will. He is sticking with trial by judge.

China assistance

¶13. (C) Finance Minister 'Afualo reported that the Tonga Government now does not expect to accept the entire US\$55M loan that the PRC offered to help re-build Nuku'alofa after the riot. That loan remains un-tapped, in part awaiting the results of negotiations with land-holders in the affected area. But there is also a desire to keep the total loan as small as feasible, maybe only 40% of the offer, in order to cut down on fees and reduce exposure to future exchange-rate risk. The Chinese Ambassador to Tonga reported that two new, multi-million-dollar funding streams, one a grant and one a no-interest loan, were concluded during the King's recent visit to China. Supposedly, neither stream has strings attached. We'll see in time.

Tonga, the PIF, and Fiji

¶14. (C) Foreign Minister Tu'a reported that the Tonga Government thinks Fiji interim PM Bainimarama will hold elections by March 2009, per his commitment to the PIF. However, Tu'a noted the onus is on the interim government (IG), and there are some worrying signals. Tu'a believes the Ministerial Action Group on Fiji, established at a March

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meeting in Auckland, will need to visit Fiji before the PIF leaders meeting in Niue in August. If IG performance still leaves significant concerns among island leaders in August, Tu'a predicts the PIF's tone will have to get tougher. Tu'a described varied attitudes within the PIF about the Fiji situation. He said the Melanesians (PNG, Solomons, Vanuatu) tend to take a soft, trusting approach. The Micronesians (RMI, FSM, Palau) seem un-engaged. It is the Polynesians (Samoa, Cooks, Tonga) who are most actively concerned, along with Australia and New Zealand.

TDS, Iraq, and visa issues

¶15. (C) Minister Tu'a informed us that, in a meeting May 2, the Tonga Defense Board approved two more six-month TDS deployments to Iraq, stretching the commitment to September ¶2009. Tu'a said the King's reaction was: "Of course the soldiers want to deploy, not just be ceremonial. All agreed?" All agreed. BG Uta'atu said the Board decision includes a few caveats: continued USG training and logistical support, plus a notice that, if a future U.S. President starts withdrawing U.S. troops, Tonga can re-assess its own commitment. (Note: a letter from Uta'atu reporting the Board's decisions describes the latter caveat as: if the U.S. "terminates" its commitment in Iraq; Tonga can do so as

well.) Uta'atu is clearly pleased with the Board's decision.

He continues to stress that the TDS commitment in Iraq is only fitting, given the importance of being a good international citizen and the fruitful relationship the TDS has had with the U.S. military over many years.

¶16. (C) We sketched for Minister Tu'a, BG Uta'atu, and PM's advisor Senituli the current state of play in Washington regarding the Tonga Government's demand for USG visa services on the ground as quid-pro-quo for TDS deployments to Iraq. All were well aware that the Embassy sent a team to Nuku'alofa in April to consider logistical details for a pilot program to assess the capability of the Consular Affairs (CA) "LNIV" portable system to meet Tonga's requirements. All understand that the "pilot" is a "pilot," though Tu'a and others made clear, yet again, that the need is for processing routine visa cases, not just elites, and in reasonable numbers with reasonable frequency. Tu'a noted that, from the Tonga Government's perspective, the refusal rate is not an issue. Everyone realizes the refusal rate is high and would remain high with adjudication on the ground; but, Tu'a noted, at least those refused in Nuku'alofa would pay only the visa-application fee, not the cost of an expensive flight to Suva. Tu'a gave assurance that the Tonga Government will cooperate, including by providing office space and security if necessary.

Comment

¶17. (C) Pohiva and other pro-democracy PRs have been in opposition so long that their instincts are to obstruct and complain, even in victory. Elements in the Sevele Government are inevitably inclined to try to find a way to limit the future roles of the PRs, to create checks and balances that protect royal and noble interests. The Government is laying out plans to have a group of constitutional and electoral "experts" come in to design the future political mechanism. The U.S. message to all sides -- to Government, Pohiva, Edwards, and Nobles -- was that, given the voters' unmistakable choice for democratic reform, the best course is to look forward, not back, to focus on the main game, not on relatively minor issues (like whether the King gets to appoint 2 or 4 MPs), and to plot the future course in a transparent, inclusive manner. If bad faith enters the equation, that can be addressed later; but for now the goal ought to be to respond with good will to the people's mandate. We also suggested that the Government really ought to publicize the outreach from Sevele to Pohiva. By all reports, the public remains restive after the election, waiting to gauge how the Government responds.

DINGER